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SUBJECT: EMBASSYENGAGES GREENPEACE ON GMOS

Summary

¶1. Emboffs and AgCounselor met on April 10 with Greenpeace representatives to respond to a letter, which the organization had addressed to the Charge regarding the U.S.-EU WTO biotech dispute. Two main points emerged from the meeting: Greenpeace admitted they must focus more on the environmental aspects of the use of biotech seeds, rather than alleged health concerns; and that there is real concern of retaliation against Austrian companies because of the WTO case. End Summary.

¶2. In a March 13 letter to the Charge, the Central European office of Greenpeace raised concerns that the U.S. would impose duties on Austrian goods as a consequence of the EU's non-compliance with the WTO panel's decision in the U.S.-EU agricultural biotech case. Greenpeace subsequently organized a small, but well publicized, demonstration in front of the Embassy on March 20 to protest against USG GMO policies. In response to the letter and to clarify USG positions, Emboffs and AgCounselor met on April 10 with Greenpeace representatives.

¶3. Steffen Nichtenberger, biotech expert for the regional Greenpeace office, claimed that, while the EU's agricultural biotech approval process is strict, it is not carried out "properly." According to Nichtenberger, 97% of the information that the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) uses is funded by companies with an interest in bringing biotech products to market. The studies of "independent scientists" are ignored, as are concerns about the long-term affects of GMOs. Greenpeace argued for the adoption of the "precautionary principle" in the approval process, even if the observation period takes years. When Emboffs noted that Americans had consumed biotech products for many years now without any food safety or health problems, Nichtenberger admitted that it would be increasingly difficult for Greenpeace to oppose GMOs solely based on health concerns. Greenpeace, according to Nichtenberger, would rather focus more on alleged environmental problems associated with the cultivation of GMOs, e.g., persistence of pests, pollen flow.

¶4. With regard to the U.S.-EU WTO dispute, Greenpeace reiterated its concern that Austrian companies could be specifically targeted by USG retaliatory measures. In Greenpeace's view, the USG should simply accept Austrian opposition to GMO foods. Nichtenberger added that Greenpeace did not oppose the authority of WTO a priori. Rather, the ability of WTO to impose legally binding sanctions should be a model for other international agreements, such as the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety or the Kyoto Protocol. This, in Greenpeace's view, would ensure that environmental issues receive the same attention as trade rules.

¶5. Emboffs responded that, while the USG would reserve its rights to seek WTO authorization to retaliate, our goal was to settle the dispute without retaliation. As to specific targeting of Austrian goods for retaliation, Emboffs said that they were unaware of any specific discussions within the USG.

Comment

¶6. While Greenpeace's public stance towards U.S. policies, particularly on biotechnology, is very often quite aggressive, the non-public dialogue was, in our opinion, more productive. We continue to disagree on the substance of the issue, but we believe that our Greenpeace interlocutors understand now that we have based our policy on science, not on influence from corporate interests.

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